

JANE MARTHA RUSSELL ("Aunt Jennie")

Aunt Jennie always seems to get second billing. It's always "Aunt Nettie and Aunt Jennie." Is it a question of a chronological arrangement? To be sure, one never hears "Aunt Jennie and Aunt Nettie." Mom always says "Aunt Nettie and Aunt Jennie." I wonder if Aunt Louise always gave Aunt Nettie first billing? I'm sure that Cousin Peg and Cousin Liz, as well as DWP and RTP, always give Aunt Nettie top billing. I wonder if Aunt Jennie was conscious of the fact that she always got second billing? Did JMR and JLR always go everywhere and do everything together? Was Aunt Jennie less assertive (in the conventional sense of the term) than Aunt Nettie? I do not think of Aunt Jennie within the content of 35 River Street as much as I do Aunt Nettie. The reason, not surprisingly, is that Aunt Jennie died long before her sister, and doubtless I saw much less of Aunt Jennie in the context of her house on River Street than I did Aunt Nettie. I have a very clear picture of Aunt Jennie on the day bed behind the door in the sitting room/library at 35 River Street. Given the fact that Aunt Jennie was "blind" by the time I was conscious of her as an adult, it is very hard for me to imagine Aunt Jennie as not being blind. My second-hand image of Aunt Jennie is derived from the photographs of her that are in the Homestead Photograph Archive. Aunt Jennie the beautiful young woman. Aunt Nettie the beautiful young woman. Aunt Jennie's blindness, I believe I have heard Mom recently say, was galucoma, which means, if I understand what glaucoma is, that were Aunt Jennie alive today her "blindness" could be corrected. Where was Aunt Jennie when she lost her vision? What was the last thing that she saw? Who were the last people that she saw? Before Delius "went blind" he requested that he be taken to a mountain top so that he could watch the sun set. I very clearly remember one holiday, probably Thanksgiving, at Riverside. The principals were gathered: HLRP, WSP, JRP, DWP, SRP, RTP, Silas Powell and Rena Spencer Palmer Powell (?), Eleanor Jones, Aunt Jennie, and Aunt Nettie--I wonder if OELR and WAR were also there?--and awaiting dinner. Everyone seemed to be in the kitchen or in the dining room. At any rate, Aunt Jennie and I were left alone in the living room. Aunt Jennie got up and went to walk into the radio room, and she was headed directly for a floor lamp and I could see that she was going to walk into it and I didn't know what to do. Aunt Jennie walked into the floor lamp, but did not hurt herself or the lamp. She was moving along very gently and slowly and the second she bumped into the strange object in her path, she stopped and altered the course of her movement and avoided any additional collisions. Why did I remain silent in the face of the collision with the lamp? Was I afraid of embarrassing Aunt Jennie? As I type this, I can now remember seeing Aunt Jennie eat from her plate without being able to see her food. The occasion was a dinner in the dining room at the Russell Homestead. Aunt Nettie and Aunt Jennie were at the end of the table that was closest to the flower garden; they were both on the side closest to the window above the cellar door. It seems to me that Aunt Nettie took charge of serving Aunt Jennie her food. I imagine that Aunt Nettie was an expert on Aunt Jennie's likes and dislikes when it came to food, and on other matters as well. I imagine that Aunt Nettie either always put certain items of food in a given spot on the plate or else she told Aunt Jennie where she was placing such and such an item. I recently came across Aunt Jennie's recipe for coconut bars, I think it was in Aunt Edna's recipe file. When I came across it I remembered that Cousin Peg had mentioned the recipe and wondered what had become of it. HLRP checked her recipe file and could not find the recipe. I mailed a xerox copy of the recipe for coconut bars to Cousin Peg, and this Spring at a family dinner that was given by HLRP and WSP shortly after their return from Florida, Cousin Peg produced coconut bars and coconut eggs, made using Aunt Jennie's recipe. I was very pleased that Cousin Peg had followed through on the coconut bars recipe that I mailed to her. Aunt Nettie and Aunt Jennie took HLRP to the Chicago World's Fair.